Contrastive Rhetoric: Product vs. Process

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In 1966, Robert Kaplan published a controversial article that inspired a new approach to second language learning research. The new approach has come to be known as contrastive rhetoric, and after almost thirty years, it continues to stir up controversy among researchers and ESL writing teachers. Those who support Kaplan maintain that contrastive rhetoric provides important insights as to how culture-bound thought patterns are reflected in ESL students' writing and how those thought patterns limit their ability to communicate in written English. They insist that the best way for foreign students to succeed within the domestic academic environment is to produce writing that conforms to the conventions of written English and meets the expectations of native speaking readers.

Kaplan's detractors, on the other hand, criticize him for the simplistic nature of his conclusions. They are concerned that the proponents of contrastive rhetoric fail to take into account the complexity of the writing process and refuse to recognize the importance of a students' English language proficiency and previous academic background when analyzing texts. They complain that contrastive rhetoric places too much emphasis on the product of a writing task and not enough on the process the writer may have employed to produce it.

This paper examines the origins and persistence of the prescriptive nature of contrastive rhetoric; looks at an alternative explanation for the characteristics of student writing, and offers some suggestions for combining the insights of contrastive rhetoric with process writing to produce an approach to ESL writing that is more in tune with the multicultural realities of modern writing classrooms.

Over the years Kaplan and a number of his supporters have commented on the interpretation of Kaplan's diagrams of rhetorical patterns which appeared at the end of his original article in 1966 (Kaplan, 1987; Leki, 1991; Severino, 1993). They point out that these

diagrams are widely reproduced but with limited explanation or elaboration, which leads to misunderstandings about the nature of contrastive rhetoric. Only Carol Severino warns that uninformed use of the diagrams by teachers and textbook publishers "can lead to skewed, simplistic expectations and interpretations of ESL students and their writing and an ethnocentric, assimilationist pedagogical stance" (1993, p. 45). I do not think this warning goes far enough. It is not only the shallow interpretations of others that can have these results.

Kaplan opens his original study, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," by building his argument that culture and language shape an individual's world view and perceptions of the self. After making the link between cultural thought patterns and language, he points out what he considers the erroneous assumption "that because a student can write an adequate essay in his native language, he can necessarily write an adequate essay in a second language" (p. 3). He says that college and university instructors complain about the lack of organization, cohesion and focus that characterize foreign student writing. Kaplan claims that "the foreign-student paper is out of focus because the foreign student is employing a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader" (p. 4). He continues with a description of an ideal English paragraph and the expectations of the native reader who encounters it.

The next section of the article is devoted to samples of student writing that Kaplan claims reflect the culture-specific thought patterns of the students writers. After these samples, Kaplan presents the now-famous diagrams of the rhetorical structure of English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, and Russian paragraphs. It is at this point that the prescriptive nature of contrastive rhetoric begins to emerge.

Kaplan admits that his diagrams are superficial and that "more accurate descriptions are required before any meaningful contrastive system can be elaborated" (p. 15). But he suggests that contrastive rhetoric can be used to address what he calls "an important problem" faced by teachers of English as a second language. This problem is "the student who is reasonably proficient in the use of syntactic structure but who needs to learn to write themes, theses, essay

examinations, and dissertations" (p.15). Kaplan insists that "the foreign student who has mastered the syntax of English may still write a bad paragraph or a bad paper unless he also masters the logic of English" (p. 15). He offers contrastive rhetoric as a way for ESL students to become familiar with the logic of English and produce text that meets the expectations of English readers — especially readers who are members of the academic discourse community.

As it stands, this use of contrastive rhetoric may indeed help ESL writers improve their written discourse, but this is as far as Kaplan is willing or able to go. He concludes that foreign students will only be in the United States long enough to earn their degrees, and their commitment to mastering English lasts only until they attain this goal. Therefore, "imitation. . . is the sought aim. The classes which undertake the training of the advanced student can aim for no more" (p. 19). He seems to hold this limited view of the role of writing classes because he feels that "the creativity and imagination which make the difference between competent writing and excellent writing are things which, at least in these circumstances, cannot be taught" (p. 19). Kaplan does not elaborate on just what "these circumstances" actually are (lack of time, student commitment or student age), but it is clear that he sees them as the controlling constraints on student progress and the role of instruction. "The English class must not aim too high. Its function is to provide the student with a form within which he may operate, a form acceptable in this time and in this place" (p. 20).

It is clear that the simplistic expectations and the assimilationist pedagogical stance that Severino observed are not just the results of the misinterpretations of others, but form the core of Kaplan's original premise for contrastive rhetoric.

Twenty years after the diagrams first appeared, Kaplan modified his original stance by stating that all written languages contain a variety of organizational modes and that native speakers recognize both which modes to use and the consequences of their choices. However:

> The non-native speaker does not possess as complete an inventory of possible alternatives, does not recognize the sociolinguistic constraints on those alternatives, and does

not recognize what sorts of constraints a choice imposes on the text which follows.

Therefore, according to Kaplan:

> it is the responsibility of the second-language teacher to increase the size of the inventory, to stipulate the sociolinguistic constraints, and to illustrate the ways in which a choice limits the. . . following text. (p. 11)

He emphasizes the prescriptive nature of the teacher's responsibility by referring to the question of whether the ability to compose is acquired or learned. Although he never says so directly, he is describing the difference between the process and the product approaches to writing. He describes writing without composition as tasks such as making lists, filling out forms and taking dictation. Kaplan feels that this type of writing can be acquired. He has doubts, however, that writing *through* composition can be acquired. Writing through composition requires the use of written input as a model. When the writing process is being used as a teaching method, student output becomes the input, and therefore, by implication, a flawed model. Here again, Kaplan seems to be more comfortable with the product orientation of contrastive rhetoric.

In a later article (1990), Kaplan points out that there are a variety of conventions, determined by culture, that govern how native speakers write and what they expect from writing. These conventions are important in terms of ESL writing because:

> The non-native English speaker is likely to have a different notion of what constitutes evidence, of the optimal order in which evidence ought to be presented, and of the number of evidentiary instances that need to be presented in order to induce conviction in the reader. (p. 10)

These conventions are also important from the point of view of the reader because

speakers of other languages: 1) may be logical in a different way; and 2) . . . their logical orientation may make them appear illogical to readers anticipating a certain culturally-constrained demonstration of logic. (p. 10)

In order to avoid writing that appears foreign and therefore alienates the native speaking reader, Kaplan recommends that non-native speakers gain an "understanding of the conventions and "rules" that govern composing in English" (p. 15). He does not see the process approach as a way to achieve this understanding, however, "one is not likely to learn to write expository prose by practicing only narrative prose, and one will not learn to assemble and organize evidence by keeping a diary" (p. 14). The one strategy he does mention is outlining, which may be part of the writing process, but is prescriptive in nature.

This focus on product and skepticism toward the process approach is carried on in even stronger terms by Ilona Leki in her 1991 update of the evolution of contrastive rhetoric research. One of her stated goals is to examine "the extent to which the findings of modern contrastive rhetoric can play a more legitimate, less prescriptive role in L2 writing classrooms" (p. 125). She ends up defending contrastive rhetoric from its earlier critics and playing down the research that suggests that Asian writing is not as indirect as Kaplan's diagrams indicated. Her "less prescriptive" role for contrastive rhetoric in the ESL writing classroom is based as much on a re-definition of terms as it is on current trends in research.

In the section of the article that deals with pedagogical concerns, Leki substitutes the term textual orientation for product orientation. This new use of contrastive rhetoric "would work to actively foster the construction in students of rhetorical schemata which hopefully correspond to those of English-speaking readers" (p. 135). She claims that the difference between a textual orientation and a process orientation is that in the former it is assumed that these schemata can be taught directly and in the latter, they would be induced indirectly. In a process-oriented classroom, readings in the target language would be used to generate ideas. The students would be asked to record their impressions and feelings about the reading. They would also try to relate what they read to their lives in a personal way. In a text-oriented class,

on the other hand, readings would be presented as models of successful written communication. Students would be asked to analyze the text in terms of structure, argumentation, and tone.

Leki admits that this may look like an emphasis of form, but she points out that "the true or ultimate focus of a textual orientation . . . in a writing class, is a focus not on form but on audience. This seems to echo Kaplan's goal of using writing conventions to help "the non-native speaker to move some distance in the direction of producing a text which native speakers may be willing to try to instantiate" (1990, p. 15).

Leki closes her article with what she calls "a touching personal account of the confrontation between differing rhetorical expectations" (p. 139). Leki summarizes the experience of Fan Shen (1989), who as a graduate student in an American university, was asked in her literature class, to write naturally, find her own voice, be herself. She realized that the text she would write as her Chinese self would be unacceptable, or maybe incomprehensible, to an American audience. She ended up writing in a voice that represented her English "self", a voice that would meet the expectations of the American academic discourse community.

Leki uses this account as a reminder that what may be appropriate in a native-speaker writing class may not work in an ESL context. What she fails to clarify is whether or not this was in fact an ESL writing class. If it was, the story works as an example of the failure of the process-oriented writing approach. If it was not, the story becomes an example of a student who is compelled to imitate the language of the English academic discourse community, and isn't that what Kaplan and the proponents of contrastive rhetoric have wanted all along?

Mohan and Lo (1985) take their criticism of Kaplan's version of contrastive rhetoric beyond the issue of pedagogical orientations. They question Kaplan's insistence that negative transfer is the only way to account for the characteristics of non-native student writing. They focus their study on Chinese students, but their conclusions apply to non-native students of any background:

> the difficulties of Chinese students writing in English

> may be better understood in terms of developmental factors: Ability in rhetorical organization develops late, even among writers who are native speakers, and because this ability is derived especially from formal education, previous educational experience may facilitate or retard the development of academic writing ability (p. 528).

In the conclusion of their article, Mohan and Lo point out areas that might be considered in future research. They suggest that students be brought into the research process to offer information about their experiences in writing classes in their home countries. They also see student comparisons of the expectations of their U.S. teachers and their home country teachers as important sources of information for researchers.

Carol Severino's 1993 writing center pilot study is motivated in part by her support for contrastive rhetoric and her recognition that Kaplan's original conclusions are in need of qualification. The study addresses several of the issues raised by Mohan and Lo:

> In collaboration with their writing center teachers, students articulate their native cultures' rhetorics, probe their previous writing experiences, and compare and contrast both with their experiences writing in English in the U.S. (p.49).

The study focused on Chinese students and the results show that this method of putting process writing in the framework of contrastive rhetoric helps the students adapt to the demands of the American academic discourse community.

Another project that combines process writing with contrastive rhetoric is JoAnne Liebman's ethnographic project conducted in 1988. For this project, Liebman had her students research contrastive rhetoric in terms of their own writing and cultures. This is one of the most important aspects of this project.

> because the students were researching contrastive

> rhetoric, they had an opportunity not only to practice rhetoric, but to study it. One value of using contrastive rhetoric as the subject of a student ethnography was that it led to an awareness of the rhetorical choices available in English or any language. Many students also became increasingly aware of the choices available in writing processes, especially as they noticed the differences between rough drafts and revisions (p. 17).

These two studies show what can be accomplished when teachers accept the cultural insights that contrastive rhetoric can produce and apply them to process oriented writing instruction. The nature of Asia University's Freshman English Program requires us to follow a multi-skills approach to language instruction that emphasizes speaking and listening skills. Therefore, most writing instruction is offered through supplementary activities that support those skills and we rarely have the opportunity to deal with writing in depth. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that many of our students will study abroad and will be asked to produce writing that conforms to a variety of academic situations and reader expectations. Even within the limitations of the Freshman English Program, we can help meet their future writing needs by including key elements of both the product and the process approaches in the writing activities we assign.

Process writing offers students experience in reflection, creative thought, and self-expression. This experience is essential, especially if they find themselves in the type of class that Joy M. Reid describes in which they are "encouraged to explore a topic through writing, to share drafts with teachers and peers, and to use each draft as a beginning for the next" (1993, p. 31).

The careful analysis of writing that comes from the product approach, on the other hand, helps students become more aware of how cultural background affects thought patterns and

reader expectations. By knowing their foreign instructor's expectations, they will be better prepared to meet them.

If we keep in mind that writing instruction is not limited to one approach or the other, we can provide a writing environment that encourages student creativity and contributes to their academic success.

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